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ABSTRACT

It is general knowledge that John Milton, when he came to Cambridge, chose not to proceed into the official ministry of the church, but to dedicate his life instead to the calling of literature. If, indeed, Milton rejected the official ministry of the church, after completing the education leading to it, choosing to teach through poetry rather than through sermon, it should be possible to find in his work not only exquisite verse, but elements of his doctrine as well. His readers are his church, and whether or not his teaching is accepted, his "pupils" are entranced by the music of his poetry. Milton's poetry as well as his prose all contribute to his underlying purpose to be a "herald of heavenly truth from God to man," and readers are affected by both the message and the song. Analysis of three poems from Milton's early period, the "Ode on Christ's Nativity," "Comus," and "Lycidas," demonstrate Milton's teacherly vocation, developing first in his intent to take priestly orders, through his revulsion from that goal, to his final decision that he could best employ his talent for teaching through poetry rather than pulpit. If the later great poems reveal him at work in this vocation, these earlier works reflect the development and confirmation of his intent. (PRA)

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"Touched With Hallowed Fire"
Milton's Early Poetry: The Confirmation of a Teacher

by Thomas A. Langford

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"Touched With Hallowed Fire"

Milton's Early Poetry: The Confirmation of a Teacher

It is general knowledge that Milton, when he came to leave Cambridge, chose not to proceed into the official ministry of the church, but to dedicate his life instead to the calling of literature. There has been much speculation about his reasons, but we know some of the facts. He retired from Cambridge to his father's house near London where he spent the next few years, reading, reflecting, continuing his schooling for a profession that obviously in his mind required more in the way of preparation than had his plans for the ministry. Following the Horton period, he took the European tour, came home and for about twenty years postponed his poetic goals to serve the Puritan cause.

If, indeed, Milton rejected the official ministry of the church, after he had completed the education leading to it, choosing to teach through poetry rather than through sermon and as a private citizen instead of as a clergyman, we should be able to find in his subsequent work not only exquisite verse, but elements of his doctrine, the message he chose to convey. As readers we become his church, and while we may not always agree with or accept his teaching, we listen as pupils entranced by his music and made sympathetic by the sublimity of his song. If we are too modern to believe that he wrote under the guidance of inspiration, as he thought, at least we are not so insensitive as to fail to recognize the flash of something very like divine wisdom, a poetry that matches in power and glory what we would expect from such holy "channeling," should it exist.

If, as contemporary theologian Cornelius Van Til has said, "all knowledge begins with God" (56), Milton was on target in asserting that "the end of learning is to . . . regain to know God aright" ("Of Education") and his purpose in Paradise Lost, "to justify the ways of God to men," was the appropriate response for one

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who had dedicated himself to be God's messenger, or, as he put it, a "herald of heavenly truth from God to man" (RCG, *Yale*, l:721). His poetry as well as his prose pamphlets all contribute to this underlying purpose, and as we read we are affected, by both message and song. Kerrigan lamented the tendency of Milton scholars to tame Milton's mysticism, embarrassed as many are to yield to the poet's own program. "Holding the most uncompromising sense of purpose--that he was a prophet inspired by God" (15), Milton does not easily allow us to forget the burden of his writing. Kerrigan writes of a Milton within the *vatic* tradition, with emphasis on "divine afflatus." While there is little question that Milton believed himself inspired, a prophet, we must remember that he himself wrote that "the term prophet is aplied not only to a man able to foretell the future but also to anyone endowed with exceptional piety and wisdom for the purpose of teaching" (CD, *Yale*, IV, 572). He mentions Abraham, Miriam and Deborah as examples of Old Testament prophets, then, turning to the New Testament, writes "Thus under the gospel the simple gift of teaching, especially of public teaching, is called prophecy" (Yale, VI, 512). Without denying the special character in which the poet saw his work, it is likely that he conceived his prophetic ministry in the more limited sense of inspired teaching rather than in the full range of prophetic connotation. I am not aware that Milton indulged in attempts at forecasting future events, as for instance, the prophet Agabus did in Acts 11:28, but in all the other offices of biblical prophet, he claimed the right to function.

This is not to imply that the more limited functions of the prophet were less notable. While the miraculous and extraordinary works of biblical prophets were significant for their day, when "the gospel was a strange, unheard-of and almost incredible thing to the ears of Jew and Gentile alike" (Yale, VI, 564), "any believer can be an *ordinary minister*, whenever necessary, so long as he is provided with certain gifts" (Yale, VI, 570-71). It is in the extraordinary performance of this

ordinary ministry that Milton was moved to work. "There is no employment more honorable, more worthy to take up a great spirit, more requiring a generous and free nurture, than to be the messenger, the Herald of heavenly truth from God to man" (Yale, I, 721). He wrote these words of those whom God would raise up in answer to "the great harm that these men fear upon the dissolving of Prelates" (Yale, I, 720), when every Christian would claim his rightful priestly ministry. As John Spencer Hill has aptly explained,

> Perhaps Milton's firmest conviction was that he had been called to serve as an instrument of the divine will. Like the Nazarite Samson, into whose characterization he poured a good deal of his own spiritual and intellectual biography, Milton thought of himself as "a person separate to god,/ Designed for great exploits" (SA, 31-32), and his sense of special vocation provides a firm conceptual framework which unifies the whole of his literary production. (p. 15)

No teacher ever took his charge more seriously, no preacher sought more diligently to edify his hearers than Milton, whatever his medium or audience. It seems clear that in the Cambridge years he expected to take his place among the official clergy, though his commitment to poetry was a strong corollary to his preparation for the Church. His earliest poetry thus bears the stamp of internship as Milton marshalled learning and practice to the goal of developing his gifts for lifelong use. His psalm paraphrases, his elegies and sonnets, some worthy of praise and some merely interesting exercises, are important steps in the making of the poet and in the growth of one who "was confirmed in this opinion that he who would not be frustrate of his hope to write well hereafter in laudable things, ought himself to be a true poem" (AP, Hughes, 694). The teacher is being schooled, though the pedagogical instinct does not dominate this early work.

In the rest of this paper I want to examine three of the major poems from the early period, the "Ode on Christ's Nativity," "Comus," and "Lycidas," in the light of Milton's teacherly vocation, developing as I believe it was, first in his intent to take priestly orders, through his revulsion from that goal, to his final decision that he could best employ his talent for teaching in poetry rather than pulpit. If the later great poems reveal him at work in this vocation, these earlier works reflect the development and confirmation of his intent.

Perhaps it may be observed that the famous ode of 1629, on Christ's Nativity, reflects not so much the desire to teach, or to "justify the ways of God," as it does a declaration of loyalty and adoration to the Savior who would come to occupy the central place in Milton's message in the later work. The Ode declares Milton's faith; if it represents Milton's "coming of age" as a poet, it also suggests his public declaration of spiritual allegiance, an allegiance that never wanes through subsequent years and remains his guiding star, no less in service to the "grand old cause" than in his poetic masterpieces. The Ode is Milton's confirmation and the dedication so reflected remained constant throughout the balance of his life. With this Ode he runs to do obeisance, and heeds the call to ". . . join thy voice unto the Angel choir,/ From out his secret Altar toucht with hallow'd fire." Like Isaiah whose tongue was touched by a coal from God's altar, cleansed and sent out with the message of God, Milton's dedication is complete; he is ready for service as a prophet of God. "Go and tell this people" (Isaiah 6:9) came as a charge to him as much as to Isaiah.

The twenty-seven-stanza hymn that follows is both praise and argument, a song of adoration for the new-born Messiah and an analysis of his impact upon a pagan world. "Our Babe, to show his Godhead true,/ Can in his swaddling bands control the damned crew" (227-228). The song typifies Milton's conviction, expressed so eloquently in his later poetry, that discourse provides "For eloquence

the Soul, Song charms the Sense" (PL, 2:556). In the midst of describing angelic praise in Book III of *Paradise Lost*, Milton himself breaks in to join the chorus: "Hail Son of God, Savior of Men, thy Name/ Shall be the copious matter of my Song/ Henceforth" (412-414). In the invocation to Book VII, he prays "still govern thou my Song,/ Urania, and fit audience find, though few" (30-31). Milton's teacherly vocation would best be discharged through song and while he expected his hearers to be charmed by his music, his aim was to reach their souls, their minds, through faithful proclamation of the divine message.

Perhaps this intent is nowhere better illustrated than in the charming music of *Comus*, a mask written for family entertainment, but incorporating, in purely pagan trappings, the Christian virtues that the young Milton held sacred. Like *Paradise Regained* of a much later date, Comus is about temptation and grace, a musical rendition of virtue on trial, yet there are no direct references to the Bible and all of the characters are drawn from classical mythology. In spite of their source, however, Milton clearly parallels them with biblical counterparts and he expects his audience to be edified by his musical and dramatic message.

Though clearly not perfect parallels, there are correspondences between the Lady and Comus and Christ and Satan in *Paradise Regained*. The situation here, cast in classical imagery, and treated with lighter and less reverent tone, presents in mortal and rather conventional terms what Milton later dramatizes on a grander scale in the encounter between the God-Man and the arch Adversary as he handles the biblical temptation story in the short epic. It is possible to see Milton the teacher in *Comus* as surely as in the later poem, though somewhat "masked" by the conventions of the form itself and by the circumstances of the creation and production of the piece.

The Lady and her brothers provided a very human and engaging portrayal of the dangers of entry into the world, even for those who have been schooled in

virtue, who "by due steps aspire/ To lay their just hands on that Golden Key/ That opes the Palace of Eternity" (12-14). England's "Isle,/ The greatest and the best of all the main" (28) is still part of "the smoke and stir of this dim spot,/ Which men call Earth" (5-6). The Lady herself is unnamed, so as to make her role as exemplar of everywoman more clear, yet in her virtue and appeal one is hard put not to recall "the Lady of Christ's." Milton's own dedication to virtue, as a poet whose "youth must be innocent of crime and chaste, his conduct irreproachable and his hands stainless" (Elegy VI, 60-62), and as one who "ought himself to be a true poem" (AP, Hughes, 694), suggests to us that there is much of Milton in his Lady, as there is of the Christ of the later *Paradise Regained.*

Both the central situation and its resolution in *Comus* parallel the temptation and rescue of Christ in *Paradise Regained.* This is not to say that Milton consciously developed such parallels; it is evidence of his preoccupation with obedience and virtue, and his desire to enhance for his audiences the images of faithfulness in a dramatic portrayal both instructive and aesthetically decorous. Devoted as he was to biblical matter, he also followed the classical view of drama as a means to spiritual health as well as entertainment. The Lady in her exchange with Comus is not unlike Christ under the threatened spell of Satan. Her confidence

> That he, the Supreme good, t'whom all things ill
> Are but as slavish officers of vengeance,
> Would send a glist'ring Guardian, if need were,
> To keep my life and honor unassail'd. (217-220)

reminds us of Christ's statement to his protective companion in the garden, "thinkest thou that I cannot beseech my Father, and he shall even now send me more than twelve legions of angels?" (Mat. 26:53)

The significant lesson that Milton the teacher conveys is that the faithful servant withstands in obedience and God delivers. In the Lady's case, imprisoned as she is under Comus' spell, release is effected by Sabrina, the virgin river nymph, "for maidenhood she loves," (855) and "'tis my office best/ To help ensnared chastity" (908-909). The Lady, having faithfully stood against the appeals of Comus, is delivered according to her faith in "he, the Supreme Good." In other words, grace is given to those who trust. So also, in *Paradise Regained*, Christ is carried to the pinnacle of the temple in the final temptation and, expected by Satan to fall, physically or by succumbing to the fear of falling and calling upon superhuman resources to resist, is sustained by the grace of God in the way that everyman will be when he has "done all, to stand" (Eph. 6:13). Milton is playing, in both poems, upon the well known passage on temptation (1 Cor. 10:13) "There hath no temptation taken you but such as man can bear: but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation make also the way of escape, that ye may be able to endure it." Perhaps also there is a suggestion of Jas. 4:7: "Be subject therefore unto God; but resist the devil, and he will flee from you."

But, as previously noted, *Comus* does not deal in biblical references, except obliquely. One must recognize that Milton chose to teach such truths by indirection, using pagan myths to teach Christian doctrine. It has been noted that the graces here are "Faith, Hope and Chastity," not the "faith, hope and charity" of St. Paul to the Corinthians. But the difference illustrates what Milton is doing. It is not the Lady's chastity, literally considered, that is at stake. It is her love of virtue ("Love virtue, she alone is free" [1019]), her willingness to sacrifice all for the sake of purity. This idea is thus not far removed from St. Paul's *agape* and that Milton so links the two terms suggests the importance he and his audience attached to the virtue of an "unblemish't form of Chastity." Even Comus

recognizes the power of the Lady's argument. "I feel that I do fear/ Her words set off by some superior power" (800-801) even though he characterizes her protestations, quite like all of Satan's school in every age, as "mere moral babble" (807).

The Attendant Spirit's parting song reinforces the moral message of the mask, and while adapted rather simplistically to its audience, it nevertheless confirms the didactic intent of the poet and poem and the assurance of grace to the faithful pilgrim.

> Mortals that would follow me,
> Love virtue, she alone is free,
> She can teach us how to climb
> Higher than the Sphery clime;
> Or if Virtue feeble were
> Heav'n itself would stoop to her. (1018-1023)

As Roy Flanagan writes, "Milton was probably the only poet ever to think of masque as a genre that could be used exclusively for high moral instruction" (22).

On first thought, one would not think of *Lycidas* in didactic terms, and it would not be appropriate to argue that its burden is moral message more than exemplary elegy. Of all instances of the pastoral elegy in English, *Lycidas* is a standard for excellence. Earlier arguments about its lack of unity have largely been superceded by readings that see a significance deeper than simple subservience to the form, and which attempt to show that Milton has infused into the poem all of his own conflict and agony at this crucial stage of his life. His reasons for not taking orders, his contempt for the shallow scholasticism of his university and many of its graduates, along with the death of a respected friend who might have been an exception, like himself, to "our corrupted Clergy," combine to provide the occasion of the poem. All things considered, the attack on the clergy, often

regarded as a digression that mars the unity of the poem, can be seen as the central motive which provides the focus of the dismayed energy without which the poem would be unremarkable.

It is the prophetic instinct, the reformer impulse, that empowers the poem. While the subject is the drowned King, the lamentable death of a shepherd with good potential makes the continued existence of the corrupted churchmen more bitter to bear. Milton would have been surprised by critics' talk about digression and lack of unity. The loss of the good man, untimely dying, will always call to mind the excess of evil men, proceeding without "let or hindrance." From the pagan god Camus and the university in his precincts, to the Galilean Pilot, and the more universal community he represents, all mourn the loss of a good shepherd. It is not, strictly considered, Milton's attack on the clergy but that of the Apostle whose Lord commanded that he "Feed my sheep." It is the same Peter who wrote indentifying himself as an elder and a shepherd (1 Pet. 5:1) that castigates the "lewd hirelings." Rather than attacking the clergy himself, Milton has that apostle speak whose mitered authority is outraged by the loss of a noble "young swain" while he is surrounded by "Blind mouths" who don't even know how to handle the shepherd's crook.

In this light, the problematic "two-handed engine" passage makes more sense. It seems clear that the "grim Wolf" was the Roman Church, making daily inroads among the English flock because of the inadequacies of the Anglican shepherds. Such progress was measured not only by converts to the Roman faith, but by Romish influence on the Church of England itself. Milton often uses the term wolf to refer to the pope (Of Ref, Yale, I, 595) and lauds the Reformation for its successful turning of the Catholic tide. I think Leon Howard is right in saying "that the engine is the Word of God as it was regularly symbolized by the Biblical sword, and that the threat is the threat of the Protestant reformation as it was being

continued in the Puritan movement of which Milton was a part" (184). In the darkly symbolic passage, Milton's teacherly impulse becomes prophetic. The judgment foretold will certainly be a movement "to repair the ruins of our first parents" and will further "justify the ways of God to men."

The passage is a strong statement against the clergy and probably tells us much about the poet's earlier decision not to assume clerical orders. In Milton's mind at this time, the poetic vocation is not far removed from the aims of the Church, and the corruptions of the clergy provide both reason and reinforcement for his decision, whether it came much earlier at Cambridge (as Fletcher says), as he left Cambridge (Woodhouse) or just prior to writing *Lycidas* (Shawcross).

In an interesting variation on this theme, J. Martin Evans argues that the shift from first to third person at line 186 reflects Milton's own "emergence from the persona of the uncouth swain" (48) into his own person, ready to face the rest of life. The conclusion of the poem Evans sees as the enactment somewhat akin to the Christian conversion experience. "In Pauline terms, Milton has cast off the old man" (p. 48). Having written the poem in the rather unreal conventions of the pastoral tradition, paying his respects to the dead King and the past he represents, having reflected on the prospects for divine service in the trappings of a corrupted church, Milton now puts all that behind him with the sunset:

At last he rose, and twitch't his Mantle blue:

Tomorrow to fresh Woods, and Pastures new. (192-193)

If indeed, *Lycidas* is the statement of Milton's decision to devote himself to poetry rather than the church, it need not be assumed that it reflects a decision just made. His retirement to Hammersmith and Horton, during the years immediately following Cambridge, allowed him time for reading and reflection, and may merely have confirmed an earlier decision, or strengthened the firm inclination.

Wittreich has noted that "*Lycidas* is a prelude poem--in the Wordsworthian sense: one that records the history of the poet's mind to the point where his faculties are sufficiently matured that he may enter upon more arduous labors" (184). Hanford calls it "Milton's first great confession of faith--in himself and his earnest way of life, in God and immortality" (168). While the poem is occasioned by the death of King, it reveals the poet as he takes the full measure of himself, his times, and the power of art to redeem and reform a fallen world. While Milton's didactic purpose may have become more evident in his later work, all of the energy and depth of that purpose are fully displayed in the 1638 poem, which is regarded by many as the greatest expression on record of the pastoral elegy. It is art and message, poem and prophecy, and by it the poet enters into full flower as a teacher. The work of this early period has been his apprenticeship, exploring the art and efficacy of prophetic poetry for his purposes. "Touched with hallow'd fire," he has found his medium and received the confirmation of his calling. Henceforth he will wear the prophet's mantle, teaching his people as a "herald of heavenly truth."

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